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6 ways journalists can cope when covering tragedies like the Colorado theater shooting

By Beth Winegarner • July 20, 2012

Almost every journalist will report on a crisis at some point, whether it's a murder, a sexual assault, a natural disaster or a shooting like the one that happened overnight at a theater in Aurora, Colo.

The untold story is the effect such stories can have on the reporters who cover them.

Some major-league news outlets, such as The New York Times, offer mental-health resources to reporters who need it, whether they're covering wars overseas or disasters on their home turf. But smaller newsrooms don't always provide these services.

If you're struggling to shake the effects of a traumatic incident you've covered, here are some tips that can help you stay sane -- and stay in the business.

Mentally prepare yourself

San Francisco Chronicle crime reporter Henry K. Lee began chasing police cars on his bicycle when he was 7. "Part of me is still that 7-year-old boy who is enamored with the thrill of the chase, the sirens and lights," he told me by email. Although his reporting hits him harder as an adult, "I've always tried to keep my emotions 'in a box;' otherwise I wouldn't be able to do my job effectively".

Not everyone is as good at compartmentalizing as Lee, and most reporters will be called upon to cover a grisly breaking-news story at some point in their careers. Such incidents don't give you much time to prepare, but recognizing that you're on your way to a crime scene, where you might see blood or a body, can help you safeguard your mind.

Seek support from fellow reporters

When you're covering a potentially traumatic story, your role as reporter may give you some professional remove. However, your job also requires you to collect disturbing details police and witnesses provide. Processing so much upsetting information so quickly can leave you feeling as though you lived through the horror.

At many crime scenes, there's downtime as reporters wait for officials to release information. Use this time to chat with reporters about what happened. You don't have to trade scoops; just share what you've seen. Knowing someone else is in the trenches with you can ameliorate the trauma. If you're not comfortable talking the competition, talk with your colleagues back at the office.

Tara Ramroop Hunt, a former reporter for the San Mateo County Times, said she was affected by covering traumatic stories, including an incident in which a man had been scalped after getting his long hair caught in an industrial machine. For her, talking always helped.

"Friends, significant others, other reporters especially," she said via email. "Sometimes, before I even sat down to write the story, I'd vent to my editor or another reporter. I didn't like the idea of talking to a stranger/mental-health professional, but I did like the idea of a makeshift support group in my coworkers".

Write, speak out about it

Just as reporting an upsetting story can wreak havoc on your emotions, writing can help you process those emotions. After freelance photographer Lynsey Addario covered the sexual-assault epidemic in Congo, she wrote about how the women's stories affected her.

Addario has also been kidnapped, once in Iraq, and once in Libya, where her captors groped her. Writing and talking about such feelings can help validate what many reporters endure -- and highlight places where journalists need support. When CBS reporter Lara Logan came forward about her Cairo assault, she helped raise awareness about other female journalists who have been assaulted on the job.

Pay attention to signs that you need help

Journalists, combat soldiers, paramedics and firefighters all encounter horrific incidents in their work. However, unlike the others, journalists are not debriefed after such incidents, Sherry Ricchiardi wrote in *American Journalism Review*. Even when mental-health resources are available, reporters resist them, Ricchiardi said.

"Their main reasons," she wrote, are "lack of time, especially in deadline reporting, and the strong belief of reporters that outsiders couldn't understand the rigors of being a witness on behalf of society." But the reality is, resisting help can lead to more serious problems in the long run.

In the weeks and months after a brutal story, pay attention to signs of critical incident stress, which can include nightmares, chest pains and memory problems. If you're feel as though you're dealing with this type of stress, seek counseling -- whether your news organization provides it or not.

Urge your company to provide resources -- and encourage reporters to use them

In my time as a reporter, I've covered some pretty horrific events. In January 2008, 17-year-old Jose Luis Flores, despondent over his older brother's deployment to Iraq, walked to the Caltrain tracks just north of downtown Redwood City. His body was spotted on the tracks at 8:15 p.m. The conductor who spotted the body estimated Flores had been struck by a train 45 minutes earlier -- and was passed by three other trains before he was found.

Reporting the story, I gathered gruesome details about Flores' death. They didn't wind up in my article, but they stuck with me. I was shaken for days afterward. When I asked our human-resources department for advice, I discovered that reporters got just three free counseling visits per year.

If you work for a newspaper that doesn't provide mental-health services for reporters, ask your editors and human-resources staff to make it a priority. It might be an uphill battle, considering how many newspapers are fighting budget cuts, but offering mental-health services is cheaper than paying reporters who take sick time to recover from trauma. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma has some tips on choosing a therapist, as well as other resources.

Likewise, if a colleague comes to you because they're suffering post-traumatic stress, hear them out, but encourage them to see a professional. It can make the difference between keeping a good reporter happy and sane -- and losing them to stress and burnout.

Find what works best for you -- and do it

One way Lee unwinds from his crime-reporting stress is by spending time with his family, watching silly television shows or reading light-hearted magazines. Some journalists have engaged in gallows humor, which seems insensitive, but has advantages in some cases.

Addario relies on other methods to shake off the trauma.

"I believe that every journalist who covers war, conflict, and who has been in a potentially traumatizing situation, has his or her own way of processing and dealing with that trauma," Addario said via email while in Mauritania.

"I write, I feel, I exercise, I talk about what I have gone through, and this works for me, but in this, I recognize that I am not the victim -- the people I cover are often victims of

awful crimes, rapes, and consequences of their lives. I feel I lead a relatively privileged life. I choose to be there, and primarily as a conduit for their stories”.



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